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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a method for making foreign language learning meaningful and interesting through using language as a tool for communicating about the self and others. Drawing from techniques developed by behavioral scientists, the foreign language was used to develop students' self-awareness and confidence. Learning activities were created, based on a sequential development of grammatical difficulty coordinated with a corresponding development of trust among students. For advanced levels, mini-units were created, based on a theme such as fantasy, death, or career education. These were offered every two or three weeks during the year. Another technique developed was the intensive Spanish or French class, which met for two and a half hours each day from September to December, then culminated in a "homestay experience" in a foreign country during the first three weeks in December (a "Cultural Awareness Project"). Appendices contain: (1) a sample mini-unit; and (2) a sample Cultural Awareness Project experience. (AM)

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Creating Excitement and Involvement in the Foreign Language Classroom

by Getting Away from the Textbook

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Several years ago we took a serious look at our language program.

We were doing some exciting things, but on the whole our students were

memorizing instead of thinking; they and we were bored, not challenged.

We started really listening to what the students were saying. "Why take a

foreign language?" "What good will it do me?" "I have to take two years

to get into college." "Who cares about Jacques and Paco (characters in

our text book)?" "This is boring." "I can't learn this." Our students were

not being stimulated nor challenged to create or think. They were telling us

that memorizing dialogs, reading about cultures and people from far away,

conjugating verbs was neither exciting nor involving. What could we do to

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get our students excited about and involved in learning a second language?

We asked ourselves a key question. "What is the most interesting subject we can think of?" Very quickly we started eliminating the traditional courses in school. The most interesting subject wasn't math nor sports, nor environmental science. The most interesting subject we can each think of is "me", my ideas, my interactions with others, my feelings, my values, my roles in life.

The Unique Foreign Language Opportunity

As foreign language teachers, we saw that we have a unique opportunity to make the second language a tool for meaningful communication on the important concerns and questions students have about themselves and their roles in life. We can do this because communication is our subject. We have no specific topics or facts to teach to get in our way. We can use the most interesting subject - me - to pull through the language learning. The fact that the language in our classrooms is "foreign" can make the whole

communication effort easier and more interesting if that communication is relevant.

It was an intriguing idea. How could we make it work? We took a look around to see what was happening outside Foreign Language. We got involved and excited about what some people were doing in the area of group dynamics and behavioral science. We felt lucky to be able to draw from methodology and techniques developed by pioneering behavioral scientists, Dr. Bill Glasser (Reality Therapy)¹, Carl Rogers (Active Listening Skills)², Dr. Harold Bessell (Human Development Program)³, Dr. Tom Gordon (Parent and Teacher Effectiveness Training)⁴, Johnson and Johnson (Co-operation Techniques)⁵, and Dr. Sidney Simon and Howard Kirschenbaum (Values Clarification Techniques)⁶. These men were doing things to help people communicate more effectively in groups, and they had something to teach us about language.

We were greatly influenced by Dr. Harold Bessel and Ulvaldo

Palomares, two practicing clinical psychologists. Bessel was working with well-to-do patients in La Jolla, one of the wealthiest districts in our country, while Palomares was working in San Diego with poverty patients at the other extreme of the economic continuum. Interestingly enough when these two men got together, they found that their patients had much in common. They were asking and answering three basic questions:

"Will I get hurt?" Their answer was, "yes".

"Will I fail?" Their answer was, "yes".

"Will I be accepted?" Their answer was, "no".

These questions are natural and universal ones. The important thing is that these pessimistic responses are not natural, they are learned, sometimes learned through negative experiences, sometimes learned because of lack of informed, sympathetic adult guidance.⁷ Thinking about it, we realized these were our students' concerns too. They wanted to know things like, "Who are we?", "Can we do meaningful things?", "Do people like me?", "How can I be accepted?"

With these findings, Bessel and Palomares shifted their emphasis from therapy to preventive measures. They looked toward the schools and developed an affective curriculum based on sequential steps of human growth known as "The Human Development Program" which focuses on three main areas of experience.

1. Awareness (successful people know what their thoughts, actions, and feelings really are)
2. Mastery (they know what their abilities are and how to use them with self-confidence)
3. Social (they understand the process of interaction, what effect they have on others and others have on them)

Putting the "Here and Now" to Work

We learned from the behavioral scientists and from our own experiences that we really learn only things that are meaningful to us in the 'here and now'. We were finding that people learn best in groups when they feel involved, when they trust themselves and each other enough to risk and to question.

Our students needed to feel more confident and safe in order to learn effectively. Personal growth and development became an important feature of our lesson plans. We realized students could use newly-learned grammatical structures to develop their own self-awareness and confidence as well as their foreign language ability.

To do this, we involve our students immediately with each other in our classes. We share experiences, ideas, values and feeling - using whatever grammatical structure we have learned as a vehicle of expression. As students build their desire and ability to communicate with each other, what they think and feel become more important and surely more relevant to real life than how the verb is conjugated. However, the foreign language is their only means of communication, learning the target language in our classes takes on a real value and importance.

"¿Qué estás contento haciendo?"

The following conversations recently took place in our classrooms.

The students involved are from beginning and intermediate levels. Some

are exceptionally bright, but most are average, non-college bound students who are discovering something important about themselves and using a foreign language to think about it and share it with others. All this is done in the target language.

ITEM: We asked a group of first-year students, sitting together in a circle, "¿Qué estás contento haciendo?" (What are you happy doing?) They shared:

"Estoy contento leyendo."

(I am content reading.)

"Estoy contento hablando con mis amigos."

(I am content talking with my friends.)

"Estoy contenta en casa sola."

(I am content being home alone.)

ITEM: Students in another first year class sitting together in a circle were asked, "¿Qué tienes que te gusta mucho? ¿Cómo te sientes con ello?"

(What do you have that you like a lot? How do you feel with it?)

"Yo tengo mi moto. Me siento poderoso cuando doy un paseo."

(I have my motorbike. I feel powerful when I take a ride.)

"Yo tengo mi dormitorio. Me siento a gusto allí."

(I have my bedroom. I feel good there.)

"Yo tengo mi color. Me siento orgullosa."

(I have my color. I feel proud.)

ITEM: Students in another class were told, "Describe una experiencia que representa un éxito en tu vida." (Describe a successful experience.) They shared them with partners. Some of the responses were:

"Me sentí importante cuando tuve mi primer trabajo."

(I felt important when I got my first job.)

"Me sentí orgullosa cuando aprendí como atar mis zapatos."

(I felt proud when I learned to tie my shoes.)

"Me sentí emocionada cuando gané en la competición de esquí."

(I felt excited when I won the ski race.)

ITEM: A class was asked, " Cuando eras niño, ¿te decían tus padres siempre que hicieras algo? ¿Cómo te sentías?" (When you were young did your parents tell you that you should do something? How did you feel?)

"Mi mamá me dijo que limpiara mi dormitorio. Me sentía molesta."

(My mother told me that I should clean my room. I felt annoyed.)

"Mi mamá me dijo que no hablara con los blancos. Me sentía asustada."

(My mother told me not to talk with "Whiteys". I felt scared.)

"Mi padre me dijo que fuera a mi dormitorio. Me sentía frustrada y triste."

(My father told me to go to my room. I felt frustrated and sad.)⁸

Tying Sequential Grammar to Sequential Trust

What we have done is to create our own activities based on a sequential development of grammar difficulty co-ordinated with a corresponding development of trust. This helps students build trust in themselves and in others in the group as they progress in the language. We try to create a safe, non-judgmental learning climate in which students can involve themselves

in learning the skills and facts, relating structure to meaningful communication tasks.

Our desire to continue with the kinds of activities that involve our students in "real learning" combined with our concerns for some academic growth in the areas of reading, grammar review, literature and writing created a real challenge for what to do beyond the beginning levels. How could we combine all of our goals for these classes and at the same time remain sensitive to the students' real "here and now" needs and interests.

Mini-Units Beyond the Beginning

We came up with the idea of mini-units. Together with the students we brainstormed areas of interests, then working with the students we created mini-units. Fantasy, careered, death, preconceptions, vocabulary building are a few of the most successful ones.

Working within the year framework of our language courses, we decided to offer mini units every two or three weeks during the year. This was an exciting idea. It was like being able to "start all over again" every

two or three weeks, to be able to recapture those feelings of first day excitement and anticipation. The dynamics of starting and stopping are often renewing. There is less hesitation about risking a course if it is short. The students were involved in doing what they wanted to.

Within each of our mini units we deal with communication activities, literature and experiential learning. This way we are exposing students to literature from a thematic viewpoint which gets the students personally involved and also gives them some motivation other than academics to be studying literature, history or art. An example of a mini-unit on Fantasy created by Gary Smith, Kenston High School Spanish teacher, and his students last year is reproduced at the end of this chapter.

Two and a Half Hours a Day

For those students who have completed one or more years of High School foreign language we offer an Intensive Spanish or French class as an alternative to a regular class. The class meets for two and one half hours a day from September to December. The class culminates with a

homestay experience in a foreign country during the first three weeks in December. We prepare for this experience in our classes, building our self-confidence and language ability through our communication exercises. We take trips to nearby ethnic communities to sharpen our observation skills and to learn more about ourselves and others. The extended learning time allows the student to become immersed in the language without the usual waste of time of beginning and ending periods every 40 minutes. We are able to go to students' homes to study and eat together, go to museums and colleges. We spend time learning to recognize and appreciate each other's customs, ideas and values. We do things together and then share with each other what we thought, learned and felt. An example of such an experience we created for our students is reproduced at the end of this article. The Cultural Awareness Projects (CAP) are a unique idea developed by the Wider Horizons Projects.⁹

Our students tell us they learn much more in our classes than French, Spanish, and Russian. They learn to accept and appreciate each other as

well as themselves. They develop confidence in their ability to communicate ideas and experiences. Most of all, they earn a feeling of accomplishment at having done something they were told was hard to do, learn a foreign language.

Does it Work?

Do our students learn their languages? After 7 years, we believe we can give an unqualified "yes" answer. In the past two years, we've had one state winner and nine honorable mentions in the Ohio State Scholastic tests. Students going on to college are placing in second and third levels and are doing well. The increasing level of foreign language interest (and roles) provides an even more meaningful measure.

A few years ago our foreign language roles were shrinking. Foreign language was not where the action was at Kenston High School. In a system where only about 50% are college bound and where we have dropped our Foreign Language requirement, we have almost 400 out of 800 high school students actively taking foreign languages. This year we added a part time

Russian and a part time Spanish teacher. Our students are enthusiastic and involved. To quote our once skeptical superintendent, George Groh, "The Foreign Language department is a vital and active part of the school curriculum that on the whole has been an asset to our school."

Appendix A

Mini-course: Fantasy

Fantasy & Creativity

A fantasy trip

Creative Writing

Literature

Realizing a personal fantasy

WHAT IS FANTASY?

Begin with some activities that make the students aware of their ability to fantasize, be creative, and distinguish between reality and fantasy.

All words in quotation marks are in the foreign language.

Continuums

"I never day dream _____ I always day dream"

"I have many fantasies _____ I never have fantasies"

"It is easy for me to imagine _____ It is difficult for me to

new ideas, situations _____ imagine new ideas, situations"

"I am creative _____ I am not creative"

Rank order of frequency:

"My fantasies are of the present"

"My fantasies are of the future"

"My fantasies are of the past"

"AM I CREATIVE?"

Prepare this questionnaire. Distribute copies to the class. Read it aloud, allowing time after each question to write the answer. When finished, ask each one to share with another person.

Questions:

1. "In the past week have you tried something different?

Have you tried out a new relationship with a friend, parent, or teacher?

Have you made something?

Have you made something new and different?

Have you thought of a new idea?"

2. "Can you think of some experience when you were a child

that makes it possible for you to do new and different (that is,

creative) things now?"
3. "Who used to encourage or discourage your creativity?"
4. "What would you like to do in a new or different way this week?"

Complete the statements

"To me fantasy is _____.

"To me creativity is _____.

"How can I tell the difference between reality and fantasy?"

A question to be asked around a circle of no more than 12-14 students.

A FANTASY TRIP

Mirrors

This is an activity designed to help students feel comfortable and relaxed

and thus prepared to have a successful fantasy trip.

1. The group divides itself into pairs (preferably both people are

on the same eye level.)

2. Each partner faces each other (without touching) and one person takes the lead and moves arms and body, keeping feet stationary.
3. The partner mirrors the leader.
4. At certain points the group leader or teacher says "change" and the other partner takes over the initiative of movement.
5. At one point leadership between the two can be made without verbally calling the switch.

The Tennis Court

The group sits in a circle and imagines that two well-known tennis stars are playing on a court in the center of the circle. (King vs. Evert) The group is told to watch the match silently. After a few minutes the leader asks the group such questions as the following. No verbal answers are given.

1. "Can you see the net?"
2. "What are the players wearing?"
3. "How do they hold their rackets?"
4. "Who's winning?"

After a short time the leader continues:

"One of the players is turning into an animal? (Allow the change)

Now the other. How are the animals holding the rackets?" Let

them laugh if they feel like it. Ask the group to share with the class

some of the animals they imagined and how they held their rackets.

A Fantasy Trip

Have the students close their eyes and the leader read the following in a

quiet relaxed tone. Repeat points as often as you feel like doing so.

"Shut your eyes. Sit comfortably, make sure that you are comfortable.

Concentrate on what I am saying. Relax. Be comfortable. (pause)

Try to concentrate on nothing, only on what I am saying. See only

one color. Make that color get dimmer and dimmer-make it dim to

black, black and nothing else. All you can see is black. All of a

sudden you begin to hear a noise. It is the wind. (you may wish to

make a wind noise so there is no confusion of the word for wind)

You hear a breeze which becomes stronger and stronger. All you can see is black like the night but you can feel the wind. It lifts you up into the air, the black air and you feel yourself moving, being pushed by the wind. Feel yourself moving, floating through the air, moving through space and blackness. (pause) You're slowing down now, the wind is lighter now and soon you feel your feet touch the ground again. The black is turning gray. There is more and more light. Now you can see again and in front of you there is a house. You have never seen this house before but you know that it is your house. Look carefully at the house. How big is it? What color is it? What's it made of. On the front porch there are two people. You know these people and they are waving hello to you. Who are they? Look at them carefully. What are they wearing? Look at the house. What color is it? What season of the year is it? Can you tell? Look around the house. What is the yard like? Are there flowers anywhere?

Is there another house nearby? Many houses? Listen-Listen-in the distance you hear a noise. What noise is it? Look around. Listen. Capture every detail. Remember everything. Now it's getting dark again, very dark. Everything is becoming very dark, black. The wind starts. Feel the wind blowing on your face. It's bringing you back, quickly back. You're coming back. When you arrive back here you can open your eyes."

Without talking ask the students to draw a picture of their trip, the house, the people.

Write out for the next session a complete description of the trip. Share this experience with one person for the next session.

"Anyone in the class care to share with us some of the things they got in touch with about themselves?"

Literature

Any piece of literature dealing with the theme of fantasy would be appropriate.

Some beginning exercises:

Continuums

"Books influence my thoughts _____ Books have no influence
on my thoughts

"I act differently as a result _____ Books make no difference
of reading books. on my actions"

"When I read a book, I think _____ When I read, I don't
about myself in the setting get involved."

"After I finish a book, I _____ After I finish a book, I
forget it think a lot about it"

Rank Order

I am more influenced by: television, books, movies

"When you were young did you read a book, watch a television program,
or see a movie that made you identify with one of the characters?"

A question to be asked around a circle of 12-14 students.

Read excerpts of Don Quijote by Miguel Cervantes (introduction, section on Dulcinea, Quijote and Sancho in the forest, the healing balm, the goat herd, the funeral procession, and the windmills)

Discuss the question, "How far should one attempt to realize his/her fantasies? When is conformity acceptable, not acceptable?"

"What is something that you have done that did not conform with your peer group or parents' values?"

Rank Order: "If your brother were like Quijote what would you do?"

1. Have him put away?
2. Try to convince him to see things realistically.
3. Tell him he was wrong.
4. Approve of his actions.
5. Urge him to see a psychiatrist.
6. Join in the fun.
7. Move out of the house."

REALIZING A PERSONAL FANTASY

Think of a fantasy you would like to have realized. Write a script, give parts to members of the class explaining their roles to them. Act out the script.

Appendix B

Trip to the Near West Side

Cultural Awareness Projects

1. In the Car:

Be prepared to tell the driver in target language how to return to Chagrin Falls. He/she will follow your directions when we leave the West Side. Notice where we are going. Write down land marks and streets to refer to later. Learning how to get home will be one of your first tasks to learn during your homestay.

2. West Side Market:

1. How is the market set up?
2. How are the foods displayed?
3. How do people carry their food?
4. Who is shopping?
5. Where are the crowds?

6. Is there much socializing going on?

7. How are the venders? (friendly, helpful, rude, indifferent)

3. Fish:

1. Find out the three most popular kind of fish sold.

2. How much is it per pound?

3. Where is the fish from?

4. Is the fish fresh or frozen?

4. Cheese:

1. How many stands are there?

2. How many kinds of cheese are sold?

3. Where are the majority of them from?

4. Buy a small quantity of cheese you have never tried before to

share with your group.

5. Meat and Poultry:

1. How many stands are there?

2. Find an item sold in the meat or poultry department you haven't
seen in Chagrin Falls.

3. How is it displayed?

4. What is the name of the stand you would pick if you wanted to
buy steak? Why?

5. How much does it cost per pound?

6. How much is the most expensive item?

6. Vegetables and Fruit:

1. Select a vegetable or fruit that you have never seen in the
markets in Chagrin.

2. Find out the name of the fruit or vegetable and how it is prepared.

3. If possible buy it - take it home and cook it for your family.

7. Lorain Avenue:

As you walk or ride down Lorain Avenue, what do you notice?

1. Any places of worship? What are they?

2. Describe buildings.
3. Are there many people on the streets?
4. Notice the signs. How many are in other languages? What languages are they?
5. What are the people doing? Do you hear any foreign languages?

Stop at an interesting store, Athens Pastry, Hansa House, or other food markets. Go in and find out what is their specialty. How long have they been there and how old is the building.

8. Meet at El Mexicano Restaurante, 5115 Lorain Avenue, between 12:00 and 12:10
Phone 281-6348. You can get there by bus, car, or walk. Your group and leader can decide.

9. El Mexicano Restaurante:

1. On the menu, find four entries that you are unfamiliar with.

Find out what they are and try one. Find out who usually buys

"menudo" and why.

2. Using the Spanish language or using a Spanish student as an interpreter, find out the waitresse's name, where she lives, how many brothers and sisters she has, and how long she has worked in the restaurant.
3. Make a list of things that you consider Mexican. Do you see anything you are unfamiliar with? Find out what it is called in Spanish.

Evaluation

How was this experience for you?

1. How did you choose your group? (did you decide to be with friends? did you decide to be with people you didn't know well? etc.)
2. How did your group get the information?
3. What role did you play in the group? (did you lead, were you satisfied to let others make the decisions, did you help things or were you a distractor? etc.)
4. Did you ever change your role in the group? When?

5. Were you happy with your role?

6. Complete this sentence five times.

When _____ I felt _____.

7. What did you do for the first time? How did you feel?

8. What did you want to do differently? (did you want to talk more,
less, listen more, go to different places? etc.)

9. What did you learn about yourself?

10. Make a list of 7 words that you associate with the Near West Side.

11. Can you compare Main Street in Chagrin Falls with Lorain Avenue
in Cleveland. How are they the same, different, etc.?

12. What did you learn about the Near West Side that you didn't know
before. I learned that _____.

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